

A thematic content analysis of children's food advertising

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In an era of unprecedented childhood obesity, uncertainty exists as to whether attitudes and behaviours modelled in food advertising are influencing children's diets. An audit of food advertising aimed at children was conducted to identify elements that may influence children's food socialisation. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods were used to provide (1) descriptive statistics of incidence and (2) a thematic analysis of messages contained in a sample of food advertisements screened in Perth, Australia, during children's morning television programming. Across 28.5 hours of children's programming, 950 advertisements were aired, 212 of which were for food products. The qualitative themes evident in the ads were the prevalence of grazing, the denigration of core foods, exaggerated health claims, and the implied ability of certain foods to enhance popularity, performance and mood.

Introduction

Over 25% of Australian children are obese or overweight (Royal Australian College of Physicians 2004). While it is clear that child obesity is caused by an imbalance of energy, it is uncertain what has caused this imbalance to reach epidemic proportions. Many factors are explored in the literature, such as increased snacking, reduced physical activity and food advertising. The latter remains one of the most intensely debated and least understood potential causes of child obesity and as such was selected as the focus of this study. The messages embedded in food advertisements targeted at children were content analysed for the purpose of providing practitioners with insight into the possible cumulative effects of advertising on children. It is important for advertisers to be aware of the potential for their messages to undermine healthy eating behaviours and as a result raise concerns among parents and policy makers. Such research is timely as the

advertising industry is under increasing pressure to develop practices less likely to undermine healthy eating and more likely to encourage a balanced diet (McDonald 2003).

Content analyses have commonly been employed to assess the possible effects of food advertising on children. The following section outlines previous analyses and is followed by a description of the data collection process used in the current study.

Content analyses

Content analysis research has a long history in the field of advertising to children, originating with studies by Barcus in the 1970s (summarised in Barcus 1980). Hastings' review of the literature on advertising to children identified 41 content analyses of food advertisements aimed at British children (Hastings *et al.* 2003): 16 surveyed the amount of food advertising to children, 21 considered the nutritional value of the foods advertised, 8 compared advertised foods to the recommended diet and 15 analysed theme appeals. A primary finding was that food advertised to children is overwhelmingly unhealthy and not supportive of healthy eating guidelines. This finding is consistent with the outcomes of numerous Australian studies (Dibb 1996; Hill & Radimer 1997; Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) 2003; Zuppa *et al.* 2003; Morton *et al.* 2005; Neville *et al.* 2005).

The existing content analysis literature provides much information about the quantity of food advertising and the types of foods advertised. Little is known, however, about the food attitudes and behaviours implicit in this advertising and how children might interpret these messages. This study addresses the first of these issues by examining the themes most evident in a sample of food advertisements targeting children. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods were used to provide descriptive statistics of incidence and a thematic analysis of messages contained in a sample of food advertisements screened in Australia during children's television programming. While previous Australian studies have provided accounts of food products advertised and promotional appeals used (recent examples include Morton *et al.* 2005; Neville *et al.* 2005), they have not identified the higher-level themes contained in the advertisements. This study provides both frequency data and a thematic interpretation that in

combination offer greater insight into the extent and nature of the messages children are exposed to when viewing food advertising.

Three weeks' data were collected (Monday to Friday on Channel 10 from 7–8.30am and Saturday on Channel 7 from 7–9am) from the two Perth commercial television channels with morning children's programming. As content analysis is particularly susceptible to researcher bias (Kolbe & Burnett 1991), the data were then independently coded by both authors using a highly detailed coding instrument that provided an exhaustive list of predetermined options to increase inter-coder reliability (as per Kassirjian's (1977) guidelines). Pilot testing was carried out on a selection of advertisements that were not included in the final sample.

During the coding process, both authors viewed the advertisements independently several times. Each advertisement was viewed first in its entirety without undertaking any coding, then all spoken and written text was transcribed onto the coding form and a summary of the story and events generated. The ad was then viewed several times to capture the information required on the coding instrument. Next, the results were compared across the two coders' output. There was almost complete agreement, with just a few discrepancies related to the food groups to which certain packaged foods belonged. These discrepancies were resolved after investigation of the products' ingredients, resulting in complete coder agreement. After the frequencies were tabulated for each code, the ad descriptions and summaries were analysed qualitatively to develop themes relating to the ad content. This involved constant iterations between the data and emerging themes to ensure soundness of fit (as per Schilling 2006) and was by necessity a subjective process (Kracauer 1952).

Quantitative results

Frequencies

The 28.5 hours of children's television programming sampled contained 950 advertisements. This equates to more than 33 ads per hour of television viewed. These advertisements included 212 advertisements for food products and represented 30 discrete advertising campaigns.

It is notable how few food products were advertised in the three-week period. Several of the 30 campaigns were repeated many times, often appearing twice in the same break. In one particular morning slot (1.5 hours), Twisties Bag of Bones was advertised 11 times and JJ Snacks were advertised seven times. This degree of repetition highlights the need to consider the implications of intense repetition for behavioural/attitudinal modelling as described in social learning theory (Bandura 1977).

Food groups

When categorised into the National Health and Medical Research Council's food groups (NHMRC 2003), the foods advertised to children were diametrically opposed to the foods recommended for children (see Figure 1 opposite). The results are shown in Figure 2 below.

This outcome is consistent with the results of previous content analyses (e.g. ADGP 2003; Zuppa *et al.* 2003), and therefore represents a realistic account of food group representation rather than an aberration caused by aspects of the sampling method.

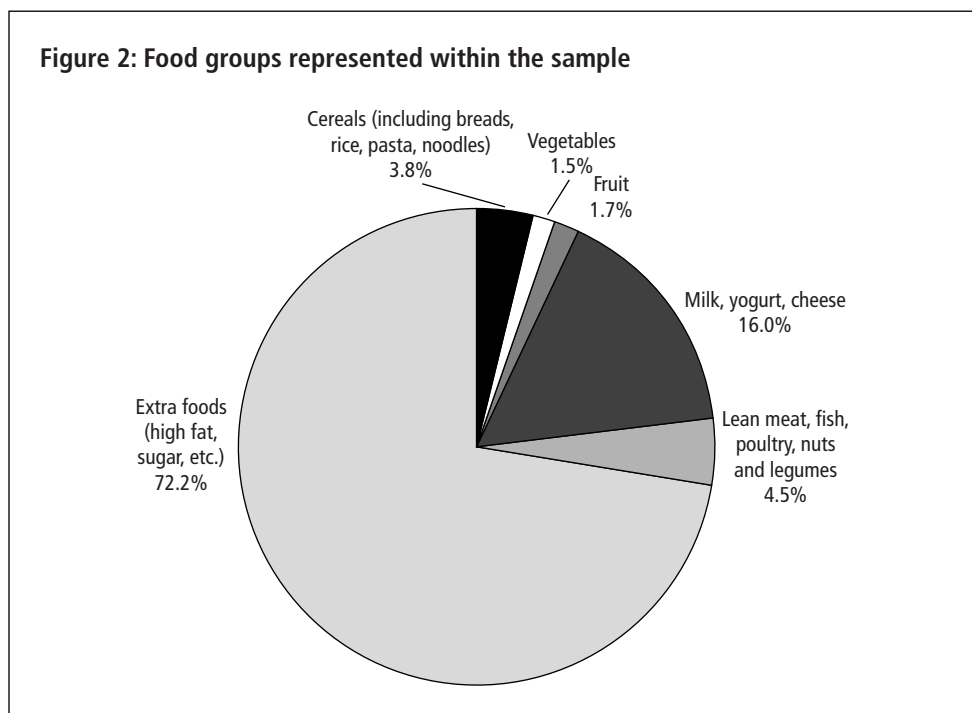
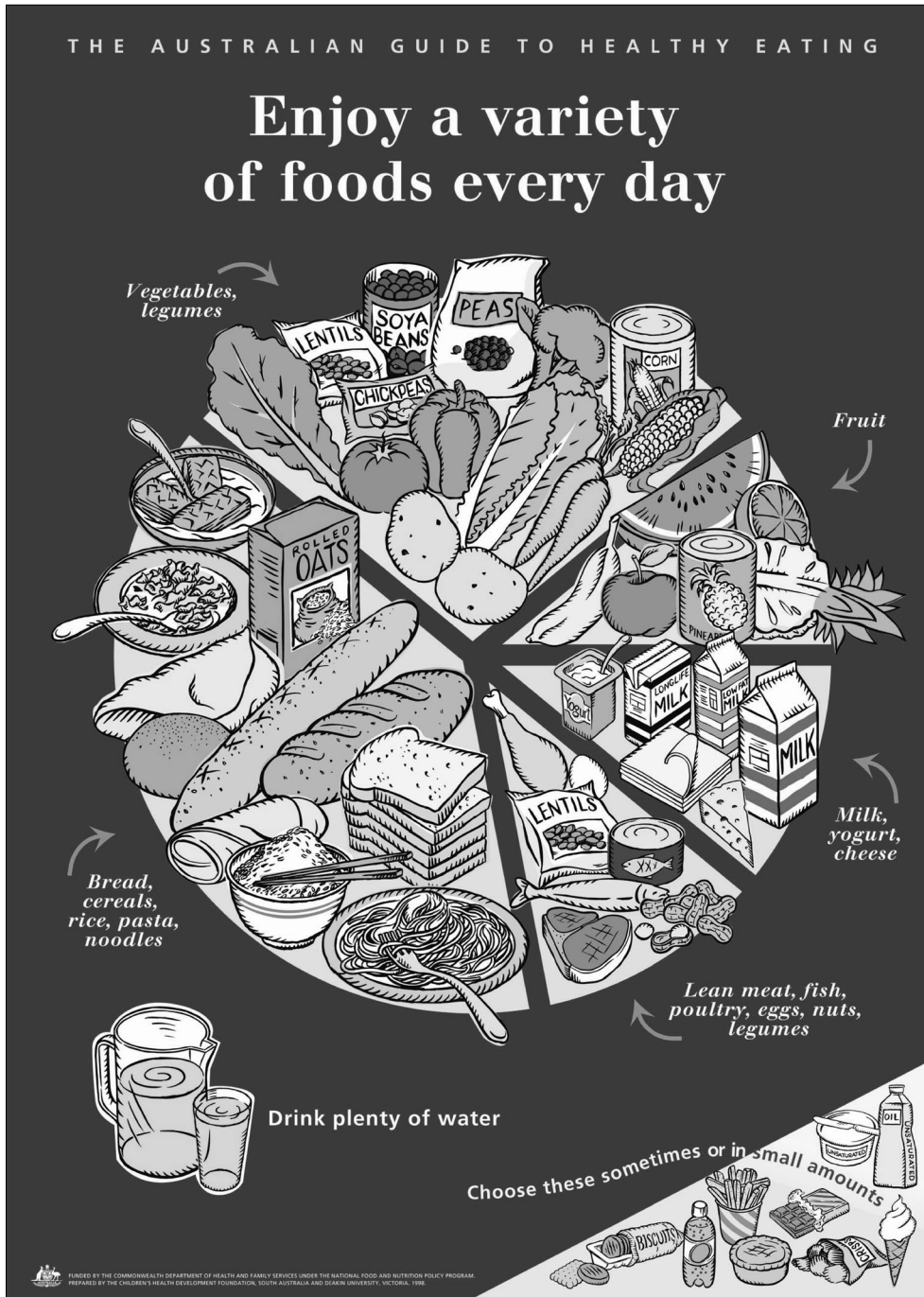


Figure 1: The National Health and Medical Research Council's dietary guidelines for children and adolescents in Australia

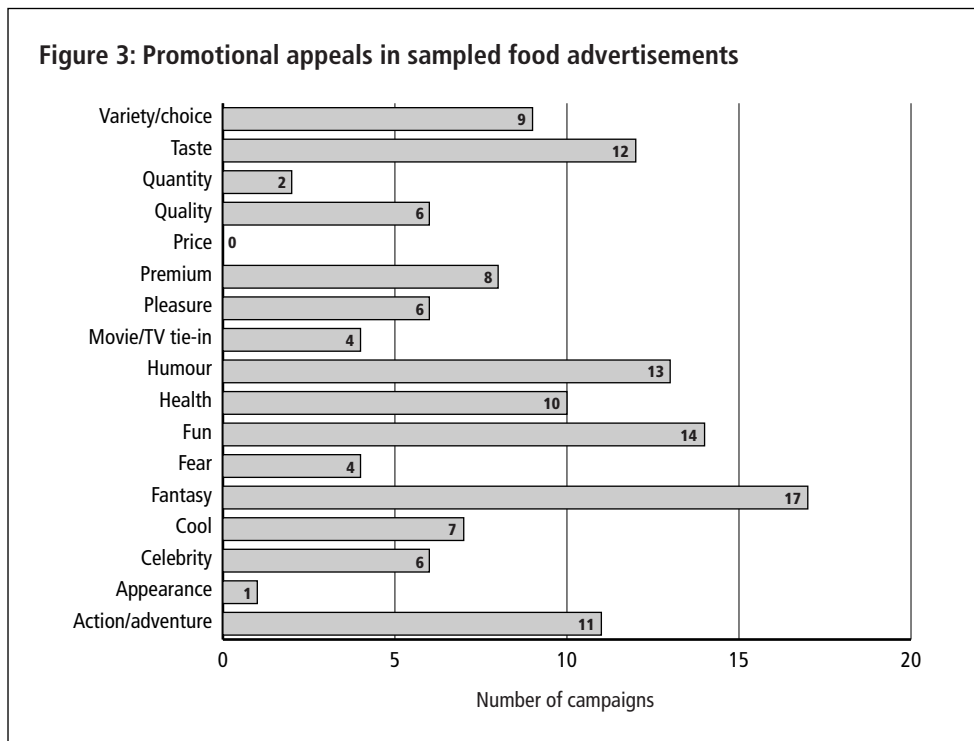


Source: NHMRC (2003), copyright Commonwealth of Australia, reproduced by permission

Advertising appeals

The campaigns were coded for the prevalence of different promotional appeals. The results of this coding are provided in Figure 3 (note that some advertisements included multiple appeals). The most popular appeal was fantasy, present in 57% of the campaigns. Examples included a boy's head transformed into a dog's head and a fast-food restaurant transformed into a skateboard park.

The ads sampled demonstrated a heavy reliance on premiums (purchase inducements such as free toys, competitions and licensed packaging). Almost a third of the discrete campaigns included a premium offer. Examples of the inducements offered included action figures, toy cars, computer games, plastic jewellery, toy horses, outdoor toys, mini books, spinning tops and the chance to win a trip to a seemingly edible chocolate factory. Many premiums were parts of collectible sets and the voiceover in such cases typically encouraged repeat purchases to obtain the complete



set: 'There are 12 characters to collect, start hunting now before they disappear back into cyberspace' and 'There are five to collect, so get cooking.'

Celebrity appeal was used in 17% of the campaigns sampled. The celebrities profiled included sports, television and movie personalities. Animated spokespeople/characters were used in 30% of the campaigns. This high incidence is not surprising as research suggests animation is a highly effective way of engaging younger children as it provides perceptual salience and helps to overcome memory storage and retrieval difficulties that can be problematic among this age group (Neeley & Schumann 2004).

Thematic analysis

Four major themes were identified in the advertisements: the prevalence of grazing, the denigration of core foods, exaggerated health claims, and the implied ability of certain foods to enhance popularity, performance and mood.

Portrayal of grazing

Snacking was the eating situation most frequently depicted, present in 53% of the campaigns. By comparison, lunch featured in 26% of campaigns, dinner was depicted in 10% and breakfast featured in only 7% of the campaigns. The most notable example of constant snacking was a campaign for Munchables (snack foods packaged in a plastic tray). In this campaign, children were depicted carrying the product around in locations such as a skateboard ramp, a bedroom, a hallway and even a dining room.

Solitary eating was also prevalent, with images of food being consumed alone in 50% of the eating situations depicted. Family meals were the least common type of eating situation and occurred in only 7% of the campaigns. As shared family meals have been found to result in the consumption of more fruits, vegetables, vitamins and fibre, and less fat and soft drinks (American Dietetic Association 2004), the heavy emphasis in advertisements on snacking and solitary eating could be cause for concern.

Denigration of core foods

A subtext in the sampled ads was the denigration of unprocessed foods in conjunction with the depiction of desirable packaged 'alternatives'. In an ad for Subway children's meals, children removed their sandwiches from their lunchboxes, stared at them with emotions ranging from dismay to disgust, and returned them to their lunchboxes uneaten. The children were then shown smiling and eating a Subway Kids' Pak.

The advertisement for Munchables was another example of the denigration of unprocessed food. Children were shown standing over their parents at the dinner table saying, 'Eat your Brussels sprouts or you won't get your Munchables.' The parents stared miserably at their vegetables without eating them and asked, 'Can we go to bed yet?'

Exaggerated health claims

A prevalent trend was the exaggeration of health claims and the suggestion that natural foods can be substituted for packaged alternatives. In an advertisement for Milky Bar chocolate, milk was transformed from liquid to solid state, which was then revealed to be Milky Bar chocolate. This could mislead people about the nutritional content of this chocolate. In a crisp campaign, it was repeatedly stated that the crisps have 'occasional' status in the NSW Healthy School Canteen Strategy guidelines. This 'occasional' status is a significant qualifier meaning that school canteens are allowed to sell the product only twice a term, yet the advertisement seemed to imply that inclusion in the guidelines confers health food status. The word 'healthy' was used eight times in the space of 30 seconds.

Enhancement of popularity, performance and mood

Several campaigns alluded to additional product benefits beyond those received from physically consuming the food. The three main benefits included increased popularity, improved performance and enhanced mood.

Increased popularity

In an advertisement for a fast-food restaurant, an actor from a popular children's programme approached three young girls to look at their premium

and share their fries. In another fast-food restaurant ad, a skateboarding celebrity nodded and smiled at two young boys eating their food. This theme was also evident in a chocolate campaign, where the product spokesperson was cheered and surrounded by children when he distributed free chocolate bars.

Improved performance

In some campaigns there was an implied relationship between the consumption of the product and exceptional performance in sporting endeavours. A snack bar ad provided the most striking example where a teenage boy was competing in a cross-country cycling competition. After eating a cereal bar he managed to overtake the other contestants by jumping off a bank, flying over the top of their heads and landing in first place. An ad for a fast-food restaurant modelled similar risk-taking behaviour when a boy skateboarded along the counter top in a fast-food restaurant.

Enhanced mood

In the search for ways to prevent and treat obesity, the medical literature has highlighted the importance of avoiding food consumption as a means of mood management (e.g. Freeman & Gil 2004). However, the sampled advertisements contained several examples of food providing emotional benefits. A crisp campaign modelled the use of snacking to relieve boredom, with a young boy shown sitting alone eating crisps in his bedroom on a rainy day. A fast-food restaurant also encouraged children to view eating as an activity by enticing them to come to the restaurant 'next time you feel like an adventure'.

Conclusions

Over three weeks of children's commercial morning television, 212 advertisements for food products were aired. Food advertising comprised 22.3% of the ads sampled and 30 discrete food campaigns were identified. Analysis of the food groups advertised revealed consistency with previous Australian quantitative content analyses that found the most frequently advertised foods to be those that are cautioned in the Australian healthy eating guidelines (NHMRC 2003). In addition, the messages contained in the advertisements communicated numerous themes that disregard healthy eating practices.

The outcomes of this study are relevant to numerous stakeholders, including the food and advertising industries, policy makers, child health advocates and academic researchers. Fuelled by concerns about childhood obesity, there is escalating demand for responsible food advertising to children (McDonald 2003). To respond appropriately to these concerns, the food and advertising industries need to focus on the overall, cumulative effect of food advertisements as this will determine how much external influence may be brought to bear on these industries in the future. One means of doing this is to improve their ability to review campaigns for potentially harmful food messages that may have unintended consequences for children. This study provides an example of how such a review can be performed.

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